
Modern Roles of History Learning in Social Studies

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Problems of Modern Japan

Although problems related to the decrease in the number of children and declining population have been the subject of long years of discussions, they have particularly become the subject to heightened discussions in 2014. In projections published by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research in 2013, by 2040, the population in all prefectures is foreseen to fall below the population level in 2010, wherein almost half of the municipalities will have the 65-years-or-older population at more than 40% of the entire population. In an article submitted by the former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication, Hiroya Masuda, entitled "Extinction of the Regions" (Chuko Shinsho, August 2014, in Japanese), data showed that based on the projected numbers of the young female population, 896 municipalities are facing the danger of extinction. Faced with becoming a super multi-cultural society, the children of Japan are in for a heavy responsibility never before experienced in history. If Japan will not follow the immigration policies adopted by Europe and America, one person will need to earn twice the current income level and pay twice the current amount of taxes in order to support the elderly and the children. In other words, the time will come wherein we will need to develop high-value products that will provide twice the profit levels of today, build companies that are able to acquire wealth from the world using advanced technologies, and provide education to train a generation of individuals who are able to build a society that can sustain and not abandon the elderly members of society. This means that the children of today will have to face challenges never before faced by adults. Even if Japan will aggressively adapt open immigration policies, it will also mean that the future leaders will be faced with never-before-experienced problems inherent to a super multi-

cultural society. In other words, in the near future, our children will have to solve problems that cannot be solved by the current approaches to solving social problems.

Present Situation of East Asia and History Learning in Social Studies

In Japan, students learn about history in Social Studies. I carry out research on "interpretation type history learning," an approach to learning where students of history interpret the past. This approach holds that there is no absolutely correct interpretation of history. The answer to the question of "what is the correct interpretation of history?" is a major topic of discussion among East Asian nations. For example, when I speak at conferences in Korea or China and assert that "history is how we interpret it," I get criticized that I am hiding behind sophistry as a way to deny the mistakes committed by my own country in the past. In the lecture given by Won Soon Lee, the former Chairman of the National Institute of Korean History, in 1992, he made the following comment regarding the historical consciousness of the Japanese people. "During the ceremony commemorating the atomic bombing of Japan, Japanese blame the Americans for the bombing, but they avoid the issue why the tragedy happened and refrain from reflecting on the factors that led to it. And although they assert that the use of nuclear weapons should never be allowed, Japan's "No more Hiroshima" mentality should expand into a historical consciousness that it is not just about Japan, wherein the Japanese people should realize that the very act of conquering other countries was wrong. If this happens, trust towards modern Japanese would deepen and Japan would gain higher international respect."¹ In other words, he is saying that Japan should first admit that the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a result of Japan's invasion of Asia before it makes assertions for the total abolition of nuclear weapons. In my hometown, Nagasaki, we have been denouncing the bombing from a victim's point of view, in efforts to prevent having atomic bomb casualties ever again. However, for America, China, and other victorious nations of World War II, the bombing was an event that affirmed the surrender of Japan, who was an aggressor in the war. It took twenty years since the time Won Soon Lee made the above statement before today's Peace Declaration in Hiroshima and Nagasaki came to include an admission of Japan's responsibility for damage caused to other Asian nations. Also, the history of modern Japan being an assailant of war is now mentioned in history books in Japan. I feel, however, that it still remains to be seen whether this part of history is properly taught in schools. I still cannot affirm with full confidence whether Japan is actually implementing a history education that will put us in a position to denounce

nuclear weapons, from a universal perspective and with a theoretical basis, including an acknowledgement of our role as perpetrator of the war in history.

Changes in Government Curriculum Guidelines and Learning History by Interpretation

Japan's educational system is standardized in accordance with the curriculum guidelines issued by the government. In the 1989 version of the curriculum guidelines, the following four viewpoints have been incorporated into the system for assessment of learning, namely, "interest, will, and attitude," "thinking and judgment," "utilization of materials and expression," and "knowledge and understanding." These capabilities are also expected to be nurtured through history education. These four viewpoints have been revised into "interest, will, and attitude," "thinking, judgment, and expression," "skill," and "knowledge and understanding" in the 2008 version of the guidelines. A major point of improvement is the adoption of the principle that "thinking and judgment" requires "expressive ability," and therefore these three qualities have been put together as one criterion. The adoption of the criterion-referenced evaluation system for history education in Japan represents a major change in historical learning theory. Evaluating a child's or a student's ability based on the viewpoint of "thinking, judgment, and expression" requires carrying out learning activities pertaining to these processes. In other words, it calls for a type of learning that is not merely based on the student sitting and passively listening to the teacher's lecture and copying the teacher's notes on the blackboard.²

Thus, the government curriculum guidelines stipulate the evaluation of learning not only from the point of view of "knowledge and understanding," but also based on the student's ability to make use of available materials, form their own thoughts, and express them. And the guidelines clearly say that these activities should also be carried out in history education. In other words, learning activities involving the search for information (materials) and the evaluation of the value of the materials have now become even more important activities in history classes. More research, therefore, is needed on interpretation type history learning, as a necessary educational method for teaching history in today's classrooms.

A characteristic of "interpretation type history learning" is the process of having students go through a simulation experience in interpreting history as a historian (experience as a historian). The reason this is important is because, as mentioned above, the children, in whose hands the future lies, will have to solve insurmountable problems in the future. An education wherein children are

taught to learn the “correct history” as determined by adults, will not give them the capability to solve extremely difficult problems in the future. Providing the children with experience of becoming historians, wherein they independently investigate, think, and depict the past, will build their ability to think of the future based on the past and nurture literacy about a diversely depicted history. It will also foster tolerance to others of a different point of view and will enhance international communication skills with our neighbors in Asia, with whom we expect to interact more deeply in the future. “Interpretation type history learning” requires at least the following three activities:³

- Thinking from different perspectives
- Dialogues among learners
- Judging of values

Notes

- 1 Won Soon Lee “Towards a favorable Korea-Japan history education,” “Japan’s history from the point of view of Korea” (in Japanese) Aoki Shoten. 1994. p 182. The lecture was given in 1992 at the Shimane University Faculty of Education.
- 2 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology “Notice regarding revisions to the learning evaluation and curriculum guidelines for elementary, junior and senior high schools, and schools for special needs education.” (May 11, 2010, Notice from the Chief of Education Bureau for Elementary and Secondary Education) (in Japanese)
- 3 These activities are mentioned in my books entitled “Recommendation for interpretation type history learning - Social Studies history emphasizing dialogues (Azusa Shuppan, 2011) (in Japanese) and “Possibility of a common history learning for Asia – historical study of interpretation type history learning (Azusa Shuppan, 2013) (in Japanese)